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Symbolism in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

J. Srikala, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate



Anita Desai

Introduction

'Symbolism' is considered to be the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with, a symbolic meaning or character. A symbol is an object, action, or idea that represents something other than itself. The word '*symbolism*' is derived from the Greek word 'Symballien' which means to cast together, to compare and this indicates that it stands between similarity between "sign and signified".

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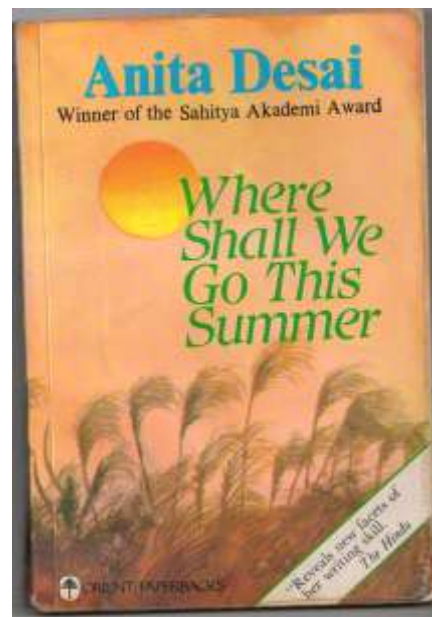
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‘Symbol’ is a sign of something else, in two different things ‘literal’ and ‘suggestive’. In the first sense it may be a literal sign of some definite idea or object which it denotes. In a second sense it can be an implication or a sign that indicates another message. It is in this second sense the term is related to art.

The psychologists like, Freud and Jung have also attempted to define the term ‘symbol’. While in Freud’s notion symbols are unconscious ideation. Jung holds that they are not the result of rational thinking, but extra-sensory. Sita, the protagonist is a representation, compared to that of nature. She is a reclusive personality, whose torment springs from the lack of ability to accept the influence of the society. She is unable to adjust with the breakdown that she finds in her life. She is shown to be blessed with a whole hearted life. Sita somehow feels and illustrates the tenseness between the family members and the loneliness, isolation and alienation of the middle-class women. This is the reason why she is not able to mix with her husband’s relatives. She seems to be at war with her innerself.



Anita Desai as a Symbolist

Desai’s protagonists face difficult situations, and are meek and quiet in the face of exploitation. Yet, they are highly sensitive and intelligent and are desperate to find an

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outlet for their pangs. Desai gives a new dimension to English fiction through the exploration of this troubled sensibility, a typical neo-Indian phenomenon. Desai, throws light on the inner climate, and the climate of 'feminine sensibility' in her novels. Desai is fundamentally a symbolist, whose works are studded with the ornamentation of symbolism. She seems to have been influenced by Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Henry James, and D.H. Lawrence. Desai's depiction of literature, poetry and music adds texture to the life of the characters she has created.

Title - A Focus on Symbolism

The very title "**Where Shall We Go This Summer?**" sounds like a 'symbolic query'. It clearly shows the doubt and the scheme the protagonist has about her future. It clearly shows the lack of precision of life. The central character Sita in this novel 'Where Shall We Go This Summer?' feels the frustration of the suffocative four walls of the city life. Sita is seen taking refuge from her marriage at the 'Utopian land' which was her home once. An island blend with magical showground as she believed. Pregnant with her fifth child, Sita desperately takes refuge from the mundane realities of her marriage towards the island, which happens to be the homestead of her deceased father. Sita feels lonely and dejected by all the busy members of the family. The fact, that she is pregnant for the fifth time, causes irritations and life becomes a burden to her. She makes an attempt to shut down emotionally and isolate herself from the daily chores. It is then, that she feels the dire need to fade far away and dissolve to the 'Utopian land', which is illustrated here as the island and the dwelling place of her dead father. Her father was considered to be a saint and villagers at Manori strongly believed in him. He was also capable of several miracles for the folk in need. That pathos that Sita feels that there was nobody to care for her and this became a continuous fret for Sita.

Existential Entity of Sita

The protagonist herself has an existential entity. Desai, has presented an intense identity crisis of the central character Sita, a sensitive woman in her late forties. Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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‘*Existentialism*’ is a difficult term to define and an odd movement as many feel, but it not totally impossible to define. ‘Existentialists’, tend to take freedom of the will, the human power to do or not do, as absolutely obvious. Only now and then, there are arguments for free will. Sita was one such character depiction of Anita Desai. However, in general the existentialists recognize that human knowledge is limited and fallible. The protagonist expects miracles to happen on her island. One can be deeply committed to truth and investigation and simply fail to find adequate truth, or get it wrong. The world in which we live is full of spiritual stress and strain. Sita terribly wants to escape from her day to day life and its mundane extensions.

Modern man has become materialistic, so self centered and so ego- centric that, he cannot afford to help without suffering the inner problem – a conviction of segregation and purposelessness prevails in his day to day life. Sita is tired of the monotony of the life in Bombay. She wants to run away, from the daily duties that torture her. She slowly feels, like going far away and leaving the place would help her get rid of her mental turmoil. So, ultimately Sita’s option was her father’s magical island ‘Manori’. The existential problem is so critical and enveloping that it threatens every sphere of her life. We see Sita, the landlord of the mansion in the magical island Manori, arriving there after a long gap of twenty years. The air seems to be pathetic, as nothing seems to be perfect when she arrives, with her two children, in search of peace and harmony.

The Mythical Names of the Protagonist

The name ‘Sita’ is itself a mythological name. It can be brought in comparison with Goddess Sita, wife of Lord Rama, in the epic ‘Ramayana’, who faces trials and tribulations. The protagonist Sita can also be given an emblematic stance, for patiently bearing and partaking all her suffering in life. Her long wait, symbolizes several things. First, she is waiting for something magical to happen in her life. The central characters - ‘Sita’ and ‘Rama’, bearing archetypal names, are far from the reincarnation of mythical figures. Though their names are related to the mythical figures, Raman was a rough and tough guy. He found her unbearable in her distress, the drama of her distress. Sita’s Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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search for space from her irritated mind remains one of the primary concerns. One of the powerful devices by Anita Desai is the evocation of the sense of time.

Island – A Symbol of Loneliness

The story begins with the long awaited servant Moses in the miraculous island 'Manori'. The summer season symbolically illustrates a 'state of tedium' that the protagonist has experienced of late. Moses, the servant who was taking care of Sita's abode in the island, has been waiting for twenty years and the island stands as a symbol of loneliness. The protagonist herself has existential questions such as 'death', the 'meaning of human existence' to be answered. The island was once, considered to have magical qualities and where her father was the spiritual magician. The land looked deserted after so many years of life. The disturbing monsoon in the island, portrays the inner turmoil the protagonist faces, when she reaches there. Unable to live in the strife-torn present, she is in the hunt for identifying herself, relating her past. The past becomes a psychic residue in her 'personal unconscious' and becomes her milieu.

Sea, as a Contrivance

Desai employs the sea, as a contrivance of progress that is focused in this novel. Sita, the central character, seems to be bored with life in Mumbai and expects to have a drastic change in life at 'Manori'. The people in the island await fervently to see the daughter of their beloved saint who was phenomenal in human relation and a living legend for all of them, but Sita returns as a chaotic mother, without her husband to accompany and with no special traits of her great father. The sea plays a major role in the lives of both Raman and Sita, because this is the place where their life had begun.

“she stood there staring across the sea at the island which rocked and floated there like an aluminium bowl turned upside down, with eyes she shaded with one hand, and face too, was drawn up into a lined frown of perplexity.” (14)

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She was a young girl when she lived on the island. The sea, which was like a mother to her now seemed all new. It looked as if Sita anticipated peace in returning to her mother land. Their travel in the boat shows how much of hurdles the boat faces as it is tossed in the midst of the sea. Sita, is also tossed among the waves of her life, where the currents drift her slowly towards seeking a peace of mind and find content in solace. A mother of four, Sita is again pregnant for the fifth child, which she feels is demeaning to have. She goes to the island not with the idea of giving birth, but with expectation that the magical island may help her, preventing her accouchement somehow. Desai brings the delineation of the island, as symbolic and magical in character. Sita's life is like the 'Sea'. She experiences a monotony from her routine life, like the sea engulfed by the waves.

she had had four children with pride ,with pleasure
- sensual,emotional,Freudian, every kind of pleasure
- with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes
With pregnancy and parturition (32)

Monotony of City Life

Desai makes use of the term a 'zombie' – an expression to portray the frustration with the rich life in the city. Sita is seen to suffer, from culpability this transforms her intact personality. Moses finds her not, the least like her father. The metropolis had taught her to smoke – a habit that even men in the island feel unrespectable.

Stamping them under foot ,she got them up,
changed them put them to bed with her last
reserve of strength, moving already
semi- consciously, like a zombie. (30)

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The incident, of the eaglet being killed by a crowd of crows symbolizes, especially ‘crows’ ‘as a shadow of civilization in the city. Sita shouts to her sons for help the wounded creature, which is killed after a long struggle. This, she associates with the various vulnerable experiences, she undergoes in the city, for a long time. These experiences had turned her hysterical in nature. Raman could not capture her words and thoughts in Mumbai, when she said that she didn’t want the fifth baby. The shock made his mind heavy – a woman, who once stood on the balcony, so considerate, the whole day keeping away crows attacking an eaglet now, was facing mental agony.

The ‘eaglet’ to her was a symbol of the ‘victimized’ and the crows looked like the problems that drove her wild. She feels she has no help in and around her. We can see more clearly the significance of the term ‘Existentialism’ if we recall that traditionally in Western thought, “existence” has been set over against “essence.” ‘Essence’ refers to the greenery of the dry stick of wood, which Sita no more feels now, let us say, and also its density, weight, and other characteristics which give it substance.

Sita had intentions of keeping the baby unborn, but not to abort it. Every action she performed at home in Mumbai appeared as sheer madness. The boys acting the scene, Menaka and her magazine, the ayah’s gossip all seemed to terrorize Sita. The insecurity of the city life made Sita feel, that she had to return to her safe magical island Manori, which was paradise to her.

The menial matters of food, sex and money were simple matters to the town folk who were engrossed in such mind-numbing venture. She had lived in a joint family set up and everyone was all the time talking about trivialities like food or at least the preparation of it.

Colour White Showing Symbolism

Desai makes use of colors to show the characters and their description. The colour ‘White’ in this context depicts purity and divinity, while ‘grey’ depicts shadow and mystery. Desai makes use of the white colour to show the present condition of the house. ‘White’ seems to be the symbol of death, for under the impact of death a person withers and grows pale and old. The house in the island was a gift to her father from a devotee.

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The novelist uses the colour to show that, the house existing in Sita's memory is no more the same now. The house is an equalization of symbolic condition like the island itself. As the house is dead and forlorn, so seems the magic that does not work anymore. Her relationship with her husband is similarly not very cordial and happy. She intends to protect her unborn child from the cruel society and atmosphere.

Learning from Strangers

When Raman comes back for Sita, she is engrossed in happiness. The Muslim couple's involvement illustrates the need of a life partner in all saunter of life. Sita wonders how, they have adjusted to each other even in such a ripe old age. Sita tries to show her love to her husband, who has returned to take her to the depth of love life. Raman is unable to see what Sita tells him, through her earlier interpretations. He does not comprehend that she points out the earlier requirement of love in their life. He is not able to bear the fact that Sita's moments of happiness are not connected with him or his children but with some strangers in the island. Rama and Sita face a lot of divisive thoughts, but tolerance paves way for a holistic life.

Conclusion

Thus Desai, through perfect symbolic delineation both in characterization and incidents, through environment and insignia, has beautifully interwoven the novel into a harmonious blend of familial bonds. The arena she has given the readers to exploit is quite wide. The readers wonder at the author's skillful portrayal of relationships.

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